

**POLITICAL-MILITARY AFFAIRS
OFFICERS AND THE AIR FORCE:
CONTINUED TURBULENCE IN A
VITAL CAREER SPECIALTY**

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FOREWORD

This paper identifies several problems with how the Air Force trains, tracks, and uses political-military affairs officers. This issue is critically important for the efficiency and effectiveness of the Air Force in the post-Cold War world. Unfortunately, however, ensuring that the best trained personnel are in the right billets is often a secondary consideration—subsumed within larger issue-areas, or escaping notice altogether. As the military continues downsizing and taking on an ever more complicated array of responsibilities, it is more important than ever that we do things the smart way the first time. Political-military affairs officers—when properly trained and used—provide one of the best mechanisms to develop or backstop today’s increasingly complex policies.

INSS is pleased to offer for public debate the authors’ insights into this problem, as well as their recommended solutions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper highlights the deficiencies of the Air Force's system for preparing and utilizing political-military affairs officers to help develop and implement the military dimensions of US foreign policy. Important policy-making and implementation billets are routinely filled by officers with inadequate education and regional expertise to perform their duties competently. Meanwhile, officers who have acquired such skills remain untapped for sensitive political-military positions due to the personnel system's inability to track them and assign them to billets where their skills are needed.

This paper first clarifies the need within the post-Cold War environment for officers with both general international relations skills and specific regional expertise. The authors then argue that a serious gap exists between these needs and the ability of the Air Force to meet them with qualified officers. In addition, the paper compares Air Force efforts to Army and Navy programs. It also evaluates the effectiveness of the Air Force's new foreign area officer program in addressing these problem areas and makes recommendations to go beyond the important first steps this new initiative represents.

The authors make specific recommendations aimed at improving the development and use of political-military affairs officers in the Air Force. First, a specific career field should be created that is capable of providing well-trained officers to fill billets requiring expertise in political science, international relations, or a specific region of the world. This career path would enhance the promotability of these officers and institutionalize tracking them within the personnel system. More importantly, it would ensure a ready supply of qualified officers to fill positions requiring political-military expertise. Second, specific recommendations for tracking

relevant advanced degrees, regional knowledge, and language skills are made. The authors also argue that the thousands of staff jobs requiring political-military officers should be reevaluated to determine which positions require specific advanced degrees and language skills and which positions can be manned by officers from purely operational backgrounds. Third, the paper recommends that an emphasis on political-military qualifications take precedence over “square-filling” for promotion in sensitive political-military positions, including joint billets. Finally, the report offers suggestions for striking a balance between getting a sufficient payback in follow-on tours for the specialized education and training required to develop political-military officers, and ensuring that these officers remain credible within their operational specialties.

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